

**Gábor Földessy**

***The Vietnam War and the Johnson Administration: The 1964 Presidential Election, the Escalation of the War, and the Consequences***

**Abstract**

The aim of this research paper is to examine the effects of the Vietnam War on the Johnson administration (1963-1968). First, the essay seeks to show briefly the outcome of U.S. military operations in South Vietnam between November 1963 and the summer of 1964, and to exemplify the nature of the Johnson administration as to misinforming the American public. In the second stage, the paper intends to examine the effects of the Vietnam War on the presidential election of 1964 and on President Johnson's political decisions concerning the Gulf of Tonkin Incident that contributed to his victory. In addition, the paper also examines the reasons and factors, namely the escalation of the war in 1965 and its consequences, that eventually brought Lyndon Johnson's presidency to an end.

*Keywords:* Vietnam War, Lyndon Johnson, containment, escalation, presidential election of 1964, the Gulf of Tonkin Incident, media, U.S. society, the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, the Great Society.

As John F. Kennedy was shot to death on November 22, 1963, Lyndon Baines Johnson became the next president of the United States.<sup>1</sup> While Johnson decided to continue his predecessor's containment policy in Vietnam, he also sought to win the support of the people for the presidential election in November 1964.<sup>2</sup> However, in order to achieve both of his goals, Johnson misled the Americans.<sup>3</sup> As the people realized that their president deceived them, they turned against Johnson whose presidential career also came to an end.<sup>4</sup> The aim of this research paper is to examine the effects of the Vietnam War on the 1964 presidential election and to reveal the reasons, factors, and circumstances that contributed to the fall of the Johnson administration.

When Johnson became president in November 1963, the U.S. military operations in Vietnam were unsuccessful.<sup>5</sup> Despite the

---

<sup>1</sup> Roger BARR, *The Vietnam War*, Lucent Books Inc. San Diego, 1991. Print. 30.

<sup>2</sup> BARR (1991)? 30.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 26.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 65.

<sup>5</sup> Michael H. HUNT (ed.), *A Vietnam War Reader: A Documentary History from American and Vietnamese Perspectives*. The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 2010. E-Book. 59.

efforts of the United States to prevent South Vietnam from becoming a communist country, the South Vietnamese army seemed to be unable to resist the communists.<sup>6</sup> On December 21, 1963, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara sent a message to Johnson, in which he drew the attention of the president to the fact that

*[t]he situation is very disturbing. Current trends, unless reversed in the next 2–3 months, will lead to neutralization at best and more likely to a Communist-controlled state. [...] The Viet Cong now control very high proportions of the people in certain key provinces, particularly those directly south and west of Saigon. [...] We should watch the situation very carefully, running scared, hoping for the best, but preparing for more forceful moves if the situation does not show early signs of improvement.*<sup>7</sup>

The excerpt from McNamara's message above provides a demonstration as to the continuously deteriorating situation in South Vietnam. What is more, as it can be seen above, McNamara also let Johnson know that South Vietnam is likely to fall unless the USA arranges „for more forceful moves.”

The Johnson administration constantly misinformed the American public as to the outcome of U.S. military operations in Vietnam.<sup>8</sup> Although in his message in December 1963, McNamara secretly notified Johnson about the deteriorating circumstances in Vietnam, the politician informed „the public that great progress was being made in the war.”<sup>9</sup> Moreover, „in February 1964, the United States launched a campaign of covert attacks on North Vietnam” with the purpose of destroying „rail and highway bridges” that was also concealed „from the American public.”<sup>10</sup> In addition, by the summer of 1964, the USA seemed to be beaten „on the ground in South Vietnam,” therefore „American military and political leaders” counseled Johnson to escalate the war.<sup>11</sup> However, since Johnson feared that the expansion of the war would turn the people against him, he decided to put off the military actions „until after the November 1964 U.S. presidential election.”<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Maurice ISSERMAN and John S. BOWMAN, *Vietnam War*, Facts On File Inc. New York, 2003. E-Book. 45.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in HUNT (2010), 60–61.

<sup>8</sup> ISSERMAN and BOWMAN (2003), 45.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 45.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 49.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 48.

<sup>12</sup> ISSERMAN and BOWMAN (2003), 48.

### ***The War in the Political Arena***

In the presidential campaign, Johnson's political opponent was the Republican Barry M. Goldwater.<sup>13</sup> Historian David L. Anderson points out that „[t]he presidential election contest of 1964 between incumbent Democrat Lyndon B. Johnson and Republican Barry M. Goldwater centered on their sharp ideological differences over domestic policy.”<sup>14</sup> Anderson compares the two presidential candidates the following way:

*[t]he ultraconservative Goldwater opposed the social welfare programs that had grown since their inception in the New Deal of the 1930s. He even went so far as to suggest that Social Security be dismantled. Conversely, Johnson's Great Society envisioned moving beyond the New Deal with initiatives such as national health insurance.*<sup>15</sup>

What is more, the two presidential candidates had dissimilar views concerning America's Vietnam policy, as well.<sup>16</sup> Anderson compares the views of the two candidates as to Vietnam as follows:

*[o]n the mounting war in Vietnam, the militaristic Goldwater advocated U.S. bombing of North Vietnam, while Johnson presented himself as the peace candidate who wanted to limit the conflict.*<sup>17</sup>

In addition, in the hope of winning the election in November, Johnson aimed at avoiding „a large war that would divert resources and public attention from his domestic programs.”<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, we should examine the reasons, factors, and circumstances that contributed to Johnson's victory in the 1964 presidential election.

While the United States was involved in a great war in Vietnam, Johnson sought to implement his domestic plans.<sup>19</sup> The president's aim was to eliminate poverty and racial discrimination, as well as to protect the environment – a plan that became known as „the Great Society of America.”<sup>20</sup> In his speech at the University of Michigan on

---

<sup>13</sup> David. L. ANDERSON, *The Columbia Guide to the Vietnam War*. Columbia University Press, New York, 2002. Print. 116.

<sup>14</sup> ANDERSON (2002), 116.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 116-117.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 117.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 117.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 44.

<sup>19</sup> BARR (1991), 30.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 30.

May 22, 1964, Johnson announced that

*[f]or in your time we have the opportunity to move not only toward the rich society and the powerful society, but upward to the Great Society. The Great Society rests on abundance and liberty for all. It demands an end to poverty and racial injustice, to which we are totally committed in our time. [...] Poverty must not be a bar to learning, and learning must offer an escape from poverty. [...] We have the power to shape the civilization that we want. But we need your will, and your labor, and your hearts, if we are to build that kind of society.*<sup>21</sup>

Though Johnson promised all Americans „the opportunity to move [...] upward to the Great Society” that „rests on abundance and liberty for all,” as well as „an end to poverty and racial injustice, to which we are totally committed in our time,” as it will be presented later in this paper, the president’s military and political decisions to contain the spread of communism in Vietnam eventually led to the failure of his „dream of building a Great Society.”<sup>22</sup>

At the same time, however, the president „was under attack from Republican politicians for not doing enough in Vietnam to defeat the Communists.”<sup>23</sup> Johnson aimed at continuing America’s containment policy in Southeast Asia but he also knew that „a major war in Vietnam could only damage his hopes for domestic reform” as well as for the presidency.<sup>24</sup> Historians Maurice Isserman and John S. Bowman describe the dilemma the president faced concerning South Vietnam as follows:

*[d]oing too little in Vietnam would leave Johnson vulnerable to charges from conservatives that he was betraying the Kennedy legacy of resolute cold war leadership by allowing the country to fall to the Communists. Doing too much in Vietnam would leave him equally vulnerable to charges from liberals that he was betraying Kennedy’s legacy of limited commitments in the region, leading the United States into a dangerous, open-ended conflict in Southeast Asia.*<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> „The Great Society, U. Michigan, 1964.” American Experience. PBS. March 29, 2005. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/primary-resources/lbj-michigan/> (Accessed: November 10, 2015).

<sup>22</sup> BARR (1991), 30.

<sup>23</sup> ISSERMAN and BOWMAN (2003), 52.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 50.

<sup>25</sup> ISSERMAN and BOWMAN (2003), 55.

Eventually, the happenings in the Gulf of Tonkin in the summer of 1964 helped Johnson solve his dilemma: he showed Republican politicians that he was able to prevent the communist expansion in Vietnam and, at the same time, he also presented himself as a peace candidate who wished to avoid a great war.<sup>26</sup>

Nevertheless, before examining Johnson's political maneuver, it is essential to see the happenings in the Gulf of Tonkin. As it is generally known, on August 2 and 4, 1964, the communists attacked two American ships in the „*Gulf of Tonkin off the North Vietnamese coast*.”<sup>27</sup> After the attack of „*the Maddox*” on August 2, „*the U.S. Navy ordered another destroyer, the C. Turner Joy, to join the Maddox in the Gulf of Tonkin*.”<sup>28</sup> However, the happenings as to the second incident are uncertain: on August 4, the crew of the two ships „*began to pick up radar and sonar readings indicating the presence of enemy ships*.”<sup>29</sup> Concerning the happenings on August 4, historians Maurice Isserman and John S. Bowman point out that

*[a]lthough there were no visual sightings of enemy ships, several sailors claimed to have seen torpedo wakes heading toward the destroyers. Over the next two hours, seamen manning sonar equipment reported 26 torpedoes fired at the Maddox.*<sup>30</sup>

Therefore, with the purpose of defending themselves from the supposed attack, „*[t]he Maddox and the Turner Joy fired 400 shells in the direction they thought the attack was coming from*.”<sup>31</sup>

The supposed incident on August 4 was never confirmed.<sup>32</sup> The American „*Navy pilot James Stockdale flew to the scene of the battle*” with the purpose of destroying the „*enemy ships*.”<sup>33</sup> However, after his return, as he was asked whether he had seen the enemy, he replied that

*[n]ot a one. No boats, no boat wakes, no ricochets off boats, no boat gunfire, no torpedo wakes—nothing but black sea and American firepower. But for goodness' sake, I must be going crazy.*<sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 55.

<sup>27</sup> BARR (1991), 25.

<sup>28</sup> ISSERMAN and BOWMAN (2003), 52-53.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 53.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 53.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 53.

<sup>32</sup> ANDERSON (2002), 45.

<sup>33</sup> ISSERMAN and BOWMAN (2003), 53.

<sup>34</sup> Quoted in Marilyn B. YOUNG, John FITZGERALD, and A. Tom GRUNFELD,

After the supposed attack, the „*the captain of the Maddox, John Herrick,*” also remarked that „*[e]ntire action leaves many doubts. Suggest complete evaluation before any further action.*”<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, historians Maurice Isserman and John S. Bowman argue that probably

*an inexperienced and jittery sonar man aboard the Maddox had mistaken the sound of his own ship’s rudder for onrushing enemy torpedoes, while freak weather conditions led to misinterpretation of radar readings.*<sup>36</sup>

Besides, historian David L. Anderson also makes the assertion that

*[t]he best historical evidence available now suggests that there was no attack on U.S. ships on August 4, but it also shows that the Pentagon did not know with certainty what had occurred and did not willfully misrepresent the situation to the president.*<sup>37</sup>

Although the circumstances concerning the second incident are unclear, historians agree that, in all likelihood, „*there were no North Vietnamese ships in the area that night.*”<sup>38</sup>

Though the communists probably did not attack the two American ships on August 4, Johnson made use of the occasion.<sup>39</sup> After the assumed attack, he „*ordered retaliatory airstrikes against North Vietnam.*”<sup>40</sup> Shortly after the incident, on August 4, Johnson told the public on television that

*renewed hostile actions against United States ships on the high seas in the Gulf of Tonkin have today required me to order the military forces of the United States to take action in reply. [...] But repeated acts of violence against the Armed Forces of the United States must be met not only with alert defense but with positive reply. That reply is being given as I speak to you tonight. Air action is now in execution against gunboats and certain supporting facilities in North Vietnam which have been used in these hostile operations.*<sup>41</sup>

---

*The Vietnam War: A History in Documents.* Oxford University Press, New York, 2002. E-Book. 76.

<sup>35</sup> Quoted in ISSERMAN and BOWMAN (2003), 53.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 53.

<sup>37</sup> ANDERSON (2002), 45.

<sup>38</sup> ISSERMAN and BOWMAN (2003), 53.

<sup>39</sup> BARR (1991), 25.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 25.

<sup>41</sup> Quoted in YOUNG, FITZGERALD, and GRUNFELD (2002), 73-75.



What is more, at the end of his speech, the president also declared that „[w]e still seek no wider war.”<sup>42</sup> Eventually, the Americans believed Johnson and also agreed to the measures Johnson took after the Gulf of Tonkin Incident.<sup>43</sup> Concerning Johnson’s political maneuver, historians Maurice Isserman and John S. Bowman point out the following:

*[t]hat is why the Gulf of Tonkin Incident proved to be a political godsend. Four months before the November presidential election, Johnson hit back at the Communists for allegedly attacking U.S. warships—but his retaliation was limited to a one-time air strike. He thus established his political credentials with American voters as both commander in chief and as a „man of peace.” Barry Goldwater had no chance against that potent combination.*<sup>44</sup>

In addition, Johnson also took full advantage of the supposed incident: in order to receive more political and military power, he asked the Congress to pass the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution that allowed him „to use armed force in Southeast Asia to protect American personnel and to counter aggression.”<sup>45</sup>

After the Gulf of Tonkin Incident, Johnson became much more popular than before.<sup>46</sup> Surveys showed that the majority of people agreed to Johnson’s reaction to the incident.<sup>47</sup> Historians Maurice Isserman and John S. Bowman point out that statistically, „85 percent of the public approved of the raids against North Vietnam” and „Johnson’s personal popularity in the polls skyrocketed.”<sup>48</sup> Moreover, the two historians also make the assertion that Johnson „had proven that he was willing to stand up to the Communists; now he was free to turn around and portray his opponent, Barry Goldwater, as an irresponsible warmonger.”<sup>49</sup> Thus, on November 3, 1964, „Johnson easily defeated Goldwater with 61.1 percent of the popular vote.”<sup>50</sup> However, Isserman and Bowman also underline an important fact, namely, „Johnson, the peace candidate in 1964, was about to approve plans to lead his nation into a much wider war.”<sup>51</sup>

---

<sup>42</sup> Quoted in ISSERMAN and BOWMAN (2003), 54.

<sup>43</sup> ISSERMAN and BOWMAN (2003), 56.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 55.

<sup>45</sup> ANDERSON (2002), 184.

<sup>46</sup> ISSERMAN and BOWMAN (2003), 56.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 56.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 56.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 56.

<sup>50</sup> ANDERSON (2002), 117.

<sup>51</sup> ISSERMAN and BOWMAN (2003), 56.

### ***The Escalation and its Effects on the Johnson Administration***

In 1965, Johnson escalated the war.<sup>52</sup> Although „during his reelection campaign in 1964, Johnson warned against increasing American involvement in Vietnam,” in the beginning of 1965, he „reversed this position, ordered bombing in North Vietnam, and sent American troops into battle.”<sup>53</sup> At John Hopkins University in Baltimore, on April 7, 1965, Johnson told his audience that

*[i]n recent months attacks on South Viet-Nam were stepped up. Thus, it became necessary for us to increase our response and to make attacks by air. This is not a change of purpose. It is a change in what we believe that purpose requires. We do this in order to slow down aggression. [...] But we dream of an end to war. And we will try to make it so. For all existence most men have lived in poverty, threatened by hunger. But we dream of a world where all are fed and charged with hope. And we will help to make it so.*<sup>54</sup>

As it can be seen in the quotation above, although Johnson explained his audience that the escalation was a necessary military decision because the number of „attacks on South Viet-Nam” drastically grew, the president also talked about „an end to war.” In addition, the quotation above also provides a demonstration as to Johnson’s vision of „a world where all are fed and charged with hope” – however, as I will present soon, his vision of wellbeing in America did not come true on account of the escalation.

The escalation of the war was not supported by the public.<sup>55</sup> As the president expanded the war, numerous „Americans who had voted for Johnson felt betrayed by his dishonesty.”<sup>56</sup> The American poet, philosopher, and religious writer, Thomas Merton remarked that

*in the U.S. Presidential election of 1964 along with the majority of voters I took the side of Lyndon Johnson against Barry Goldwater, and my reason for doing so was that I did*

---

<sup>52</sup> BARR (1991), 30.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 30. Johnson also „kept details of the number of troops in Vietnam a secret because he feared his actions would be unpopular with the American people” BARR (1991), 62.

<sup>54</sup> Quoted in HUNT (2010), 69-71.

<sup>55</sup> BARR (1991), 62.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 62.



*not want Goldwater's belligerent policy in Vietnam. However, though Johnson won the election, Goldwater's policy in Vietnam was what we got.*<sup>57</sup>

As the above quotation demonstrates, Merton – who spoke on behalf of numerous Americans – disapproved of the escalation and he also criticized Johnson for misleading the people.

The media also played a crucial role in influencing public opinion about the Johnson administration.<sup>58</sup> Although the government „gave Americans the impression that the war effort was going well,” television and the newspapers „were reporting a much different picture.”<sup>59</sup> Johnson became so unpopular that „[b]y the end of 1965, the media had coined the term „credibility gap” to describe the difference between what Johnson had been telling Americans about the war and what reporters were reporting.”<sup>60</sup> Since television and the newspapers showed the cruelties of the war and revealed that the military actions in Vietnam were ineffective, a great number of Americans who trusted Johnson realized that the president deceived them.<sup>61</sup> Thus, more and more people moved to the streets to demonstrate against the war.<sup>62</sup>

The escalation of the war also thwarted Johnson's „Great Society of America.”<sup>63</sup> Before the president expanded the war, „Congress passed laws that helped pay health care costs for senior citizens, made it easier for black people to vote, helped the unemployed, expanded the food stamp program for the needy, and made it easier for young people to get jobs.”<sup>64</sup> However, as historian Bruce O. Solheim points out, „[t]he war was already turning the economy sour by 1967 as Johnson was forced to raise taxes to pay for the war in Vietnam and his war on poverty.”<sup>65</sup> Table 1 in the Appendix section of this paper (see on page 12) demonstrates that the expenses of the war drastically increased by 1967, namely from 5,812 USD in 1966 to 20,133 USD in 1967 that is far more than a 300% increase. In addition, Table 1 also shows that the expenses of the war remained

---

<sup>57</sup> Cecil WOOLF and John BAGGULEY (eds.), *Authors Take Sides on Vietnam*. Simon and Schuster, New York, 1967. Print. 51.

<sup>58</sup> BARR (1991), 63-64.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 62-63.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 63-64.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 63-64.

<sup>62</sup> YOUNG, FITZGERALD, and GRUNFELD (2002), 84.

<sup>63</sup> BARR (1991), 30.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 30.

<sup>65</sup> Bruce O. SOLHEIM, *The Vietnam War Era, A Personal Journey*. Praeger Publishers Westport, CT, 2006. Print. 109.

high until 1970. Consequently, as author Roger Barr underlines as to Johnson,

*[a]lthough he insisted that the country could afford both the war and the Great Society programs he wanted, his critics claimed that America could not pay for both „guns” and „butter.”*<sup>66</sup>

All in all, the majority of Americans who sought for the social wellbeing agreed with Martin Luther King, Jr. who remarked during an antiwar demonstration on February 25, 1967 that *„the promises of the Great Society have been shot down on the battlefield of Vietnam.”*<sup>67</sup>

By the spring of 1968, *„Johnson [felt] as though he were fighting two wars, one in Vietnam and one in his own country.”*<sup>68</sup> In March 1968, a survey revealed that *„49 percent, almost half, of the American public viewed the war as „a mistake”*<sup>69</sup> What is more, by 1968, the president himself realized that *„he had destroyed his credibility with his country.”*<sup>70</sup> Johnson also became *„a deeply troubled man, physically exhausted, emotionally drained, frustrated by the lack of success.”*<sup>71</sup> As a result of the antiwar demonstrations across the country, Johnson recognized that *„he had to end the war in Vietnam quickly to satisfy the American people.”*<sup>72</sup> Eventually, on March 31, 1968, the president announced on television that

*[w]e are prepared to move immediately toward peace through negotiations. So, tonight, in the hope that this action will lead to early talks, I am taking the first step to deescalate the conflict. We are reducing—substantially reducing—the present level of hostilities. And we are doing so unilaterally, and at once. [...]*  
*I shall not seek, and I will not accept, the nomination of my party for another term as your president.*<sup>73</sup>

Thus, while the president *„was ready to deescalate the conflict,*

---

<sup>66</sup> BARR (1991), 30.

<sup>67</sup> Quoted in SOLHEIM (2006), 107.

<sup>68</sup> BARR (1991), 65.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, 65.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 66.

<sup>71</sup> SOLHEIM (2006), 67.

<sup>72</sup> BARR (1991), 65.

<sup>73</sup> Quoted in HUNT (2010), 97-98.

*effectively paving the way for negotiations,*"<sup>74</sup> as Roger Barr asserts, Johnson *„was willing to step aside and let a new president lead the United States out of the terrible nightmare of the Vietnam War."*<sup>75</sup>

### ***Summary and Conclusion***

In conclusion, as Johnson became president in November 1963, the American military operations in South Vietnam were ineffective to defeat the communists.<sup>76</sup> In order to achieve victory, the United States needed to expand the war but, because of the forthcoming election in November 1964, President Johnson decided to reschedule the escalation.<sup>77</sup> In addition, while Johnson sought to build up *„the Great Society of America,"* he was also criticized by the Republicans for not being able to contain the spread of communism in Vietnam.<sup>78</sup> Eventually, the supposed incident on August 4, 1964 in the Gulf of Tonkin helped Johnson, on the one hand, show his determination to contain the spread of communism in Vietnam, and on the other hand, present himself for the upcoming election as a peace candidate.<sup>79</sup>

However, after he won the election, with the political and military power in his hand guaranteed by the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, he escalated the war in 1965.<sup>80</sup> Afterward, step by step, Johnson's plan for *„building a Great Society in America"* fell through a result of the increased costs of the war,<sup>81</sup> and he also *„lost his credibility with the American people by not being honest with them."*<sup>82</sup> By 1968, Johnson became so unpopular that he aimed at ending the war while he also decided not to run for reelection.<sup>83</sup> All in all, as author Roger Barr mentions concerning Lyndon Johnson: *„[h]e is remembered more as a war president than the creator of the Great Society."*<sup>84</sup>

---

<sup>74</sup> HUNT (2010), 96.

<sup>75</sup> BARR (1991), 66.

<sup>76</sup> ISSERMAN and BOWMAN (2003), 45.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid, 48.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, 52.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid, 55.

<sup>80</sup> BARR (1991), 30.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid, 30.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid, 62.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid, 66.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid, 30.

## APPENDIX

U.S. Government Military Expenditures in Southeast Asia	
Fiscal Year	Full Cost (millions)
1965	\$ 103
1966	5,812
1967	20,133
1968	26,517
1969	28,805
1970	23,052
1971	14,719
1972	9,261
Full costs are for all forces and include personnel, aircraft, operations, munitions used, and equipment lost in the Southeast Asia conflict.	

Source: ANDERSON, David L., *The Columbia Guide to the Vietnam War*. Columbia University Press, New York, 2002. Print. 287.